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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of reading in the lives of high school students and discusses research that suggests ways to motivate adolescents to read. Research reviewed in the paper indicates that the major factors that influence adolescent reading are gender, age or maturity, intelligence, and socioeconomic background. The summary of the literature concludes that many of the problems in getting adolescents to read are still the same as in the past: other pressures on their time, difficulty in finding interesting material, and the encroachment of the media--television in particular--upon their reading opportunities. (MKM)

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A STUDY OF

THE READING PREFERENCE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Reading is probably the single most important skill that a student will learn in school, since his ability to learn from then on is predicated on knowing how to read. According to Duck (1979), it is not only a tool for the adolescent, but a bridge to help him through a difficult age, and should provide him with pleasure as well.

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Crowder (1971) extends the importance of reading for adolescents and adults, since he feels that literature can help in fostering international realtions by promoting an awareness of the similarity of problems between nations, revealing man's quest for peace, and helping people to see the humanness of others.

According to Pilgrim (1968), however, as a young person (ages 12-15) matures, the amount of reading he does generally decreases. Sometimes he will have already read the available books of interest to him. Sometimes the library collection is inadequate. There are other pressures: homework, extra-curricular activities, and social activities. There is a need to help the young adolescent learn firsthand the excitement and pleasure of reading.

The media are another reason for the decrease in reading. Norvell (1973) stated that most students spend five hours daily on other media (television, radio, comics, periodicals) in contrast to twenty-two minutes in voluntary reading.

Larrick (1978) pointed out the rise of the influence of television from the early 50's, when only one million households in the United States had a television set, to 1977, when 73 million had at least one television set. She stated that the average American school child watches 5000 hours of television before entering first grade,

> "sitting before the set for long hours--alone, immobile, silent, receiving instead of producing, with no time or incentive to question....'These children expect the teacher to give them everything....because on television everything is given to them. (p. 39)

she quotes Walter Sheramm of the East-West Research Center in Hawaii, who points out that heavily TV-oriented people are accustomed to exercising the right hemisphere of the brain (the visual, affective, simultaneous side), while print-oriented people are accustomed to exercising the left hemisphere (the logical, verbal, linear side). They therefore have difficulty with the process of reading.

Aside from the influence of television, why do some read and others do not? Waples (1931) pointed out that individual readers are different; they read according to tastes, habits, incentives, and opportunity. Various conditions interfere with reading interest, such as lack of time, lack of reading material, insufficient vocabulary, and many others. He noted that the importance of reading to adults is directly related to the schools; that adults are guided throughtout life by what they have learned in school; and that the school library and teachers will have a great influence on future reading habits. According to Mertz (1975), peer pressure can also be a great influence. For example, the "cult of masculinity that says reading is sissy."

Painter (1971) confirms the importance of reading and of supplying the child with quality reading so his continued satisfaction will make him a lifetime reader.

How, then, do we get adolescents to read, given the many other intrusions upon their time? Chantland (1979) recounted the importance of example: when she began reading at every possible spare moment in school and her students saw her, they too began to read. Pilgrim (1968) stressed the importance of having a number

of quality books available that will interest the children.

Benedict (1973) stated that students read to find out about themselves, about others, and about the world. Mertz (1975) stated that since adolescence is a "search for self", children will choose works in a search for culturally acceptable models. Many are anxious because of the strains of adolescence, and are looking for answers on how to cope with their world.

The major factors that influence reading, according to Norvell (1973) are gender, age or maturity, and intelligence. Pilgrim (1968) added socioeconomic background as another factor, and this was confirmed by Mertz (1975), who added that the onset of puberty brings to the fore the adolescents' interest in the subject of sex, which can prove a powerful motivation for learning.

Fader (1968), whose work at a Detroit school for boys led to his best-selling Hooked on Books: Program & Proof, related the story of an extremely poor reader who chose Hawthorne's A Scarlet Letter because he wanted to "read the book about the whore." In spite of his tremendous difficulty with vocabulary, his interest enabled him to finish the book, upon which he stated: "She weren't no whore!" Kagan (1979) quoted best-selling author Judy Blume, who reported that many of the letters she received from young adolescents ask questions about their changing bodies and sex.

The gender of the reader has much to do with reading habits. Witty (1961) stated that girls read more than boys in all grades. Pilgrim (1968) explained that differences in size and physical development caused by the onset of puberty are the bases for many

sharp differences in interests between boys and girls, particularly during the period of early adolescence, and their choice of voluntary reading reflected this difference.

Stanchfield (1979) pointed out that boys experience greater difficulty than girls in learning to read, probably because of basic differences in boys' language development patterns. Her investigations into the reading interests of boys in 1962 and 1972 showed that junior high boys enjoyed reading about outdoor life, explorations and expeditions, sports, science fiction, sea adventure, humor, mystery and detective, and war. They also enjoyed reading about automobiles, outer space, and occupations. She stated that their reading interests remained fairly stable between the two dates, and some slight shifts were attributable to television, since the slower reader preferred books with TV tie-ins.

Witty (1961) and Smith (1961) showed that boys in grades 9 and 10 were interested in mystery, sports, adventure, animals, the sea, and famous people, while girls in grades 9 and 10 enjoyed romance, mystery, career, animals, famous people, and comedy. By grades 11 and 12, however, boys' interests have grown to include careers, people from other lands, and history, while girls' interests had also expanded to travels and adventure. Stanchfield (1971) reiterated the students' major interest in imaginative literature relevant to their own lives.

Maturity is another factor in students' choice of reading matter. Reid (1972) generalized that junior readers in early adolescence favor books about family, peer group relationships

and their growth toward maturity, while senior readers preferred books about war and peace, male female relationships, and more serious subjects such as racism and poverty.

McKay (1971) saw high school readers passing through stages in which:

> they find satisfaction in content; in picturing themselves as important parts of the world; in seeing themselves as normal human beings; in seeing life's problems and the prevalent ideas of life, such as peace and war, wrong and right, love, birth and death; and when reading maturity arrives, in sensing the relationship of form in writing to what is being written about (p. 56).

Adams (1962) studied the leisure time reading preferences of ninth grade students, and found that their preferences in types of magazines were led by : 1) teen-age magazines, 2) comics, 3) stage and screen, 4) true romance, and 5) mechanical. Pilgrim (1968) found that the young readers, both boys and girls, enjoyed animal stories and this interest persisted into high school She saw their need for adventure stories as an outlet and as a direct result of the action present in our environment; that boys preferred how-to-do-it books, sports, and science fiction, while girls were more interested in careers and young love as well as family life stories. Both sexes were interested in good books about western and pioneer life, but that not many were available to fulfill that demand.

Carlsen (1967) has listed the stages of reading development as follows:

I. Early Adolescence, ages 11-14, grades 5 to 8 or 9

1. Animal stories
2. Adventure stories
3. Mystery
4. Supernatural
5. Sports
6. Growing up around the world
7. Home and family life
8. Broad slapstick
9. Settings in the past

II. Middle Adolescence, ages 15-16, grades 9 or 10

1. Nonfiction adventure
2. War stories
3. Historical novels
4. Mystical romance
5. Story of adolescent life

III. Late Adolescence, ages 16-18, last two years of high school or entering college or the working world

Some adult books, but they still discriminate:

1. Search for personal values
2. Books of social significance
3. Strange and unusual human experience
4. Transition into adult life

Pilgrim (1968) stated that:

> As a young person develops toward adulthood, his reading interests change. The interests of the more mature senior high school student, for example, are much like those of adult readers. Boys and girls move closer together in their interests, although some differences remain throughout life. Women tend to avoid books containing violence and show more interest in romances with female characters dominant. Girls continue to like love stories, the type known as romantic fiction, such as that by the Brontes and DuMaurier. Boys still enjoy adventure--war, exploration, sea stories, or mountain climbing. They are interested in factual material and real life experiences. Like older girls, boys broaden their interest in animal stories from dogs to all of nature, and enjoy more realism (pp 65-66).

She stated that older adolescents want books with more depth and understanding. The intelligence of the reader affects the rapidity with which young people go through this pattern of reading interests and a given level of reading. A student who has difficulty reading will show his preference not for a different type of story, but for a different type of format: he will prefer a short book with a "catchy" title, wide margins and clear print, short chapters with much direct conversation, and much action.

She recommended that:

> the very nature of adolescence itself--its wide spread of interest, volatile emotions, sharp individual differences, its craving for action and excitement, its spread of maturity and reading abilities, makes it imperative that young people have a large, diversified collection of books from which to choose. Continuing advancement toward reading

> maturity is dependent upon the availability of such a collection of books (p. 121).

Lampert and Saunders (1976) show that the students they term "unskilled non-readers" do indeed read, but they read newspaper comics or comic magazines. Strelecki (1979) also believes that there are more readers than we have been led to believe. It is not that "Johnny Can't Read", but that "Johnny Won't Read in School", and she blames the poor choice of reading matter. Johnny does not want to read the laundered and sterilized classics. He wants to read current commercially produced material. He enjoys books and magazines with TV tie-ins, and Kleiman (1979) reported that an international group of librarians, after a lengthy seminar sponsored by the American Library Association in 1979, advocated actively using television as a tool to whet the interest of children in subjects they see on television, so that they will want to read to find out more about them.

McLaughlin (1980) suggested stocking classroom libraries with books we feel have special merit, and that these should include many more popular works, even at the expense of the hoary classics that teachers still insist upon including in the collection.

A summary of the literature concludes that many of the problems in getting adolescents to read are still the same: other pressures on their time, difficulty in finding interesting material, and (since the 1950's) the encroachment of the media, television in particular, upon their reading opportunities.

These problems, along with the difference in gender, complicate the differences to be expected between freshmen and seniors caused by puberty, with its attendant physical and emotional changes, the normal maturing process caused by age, and the vast differences in reading ability found in any group of children.

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